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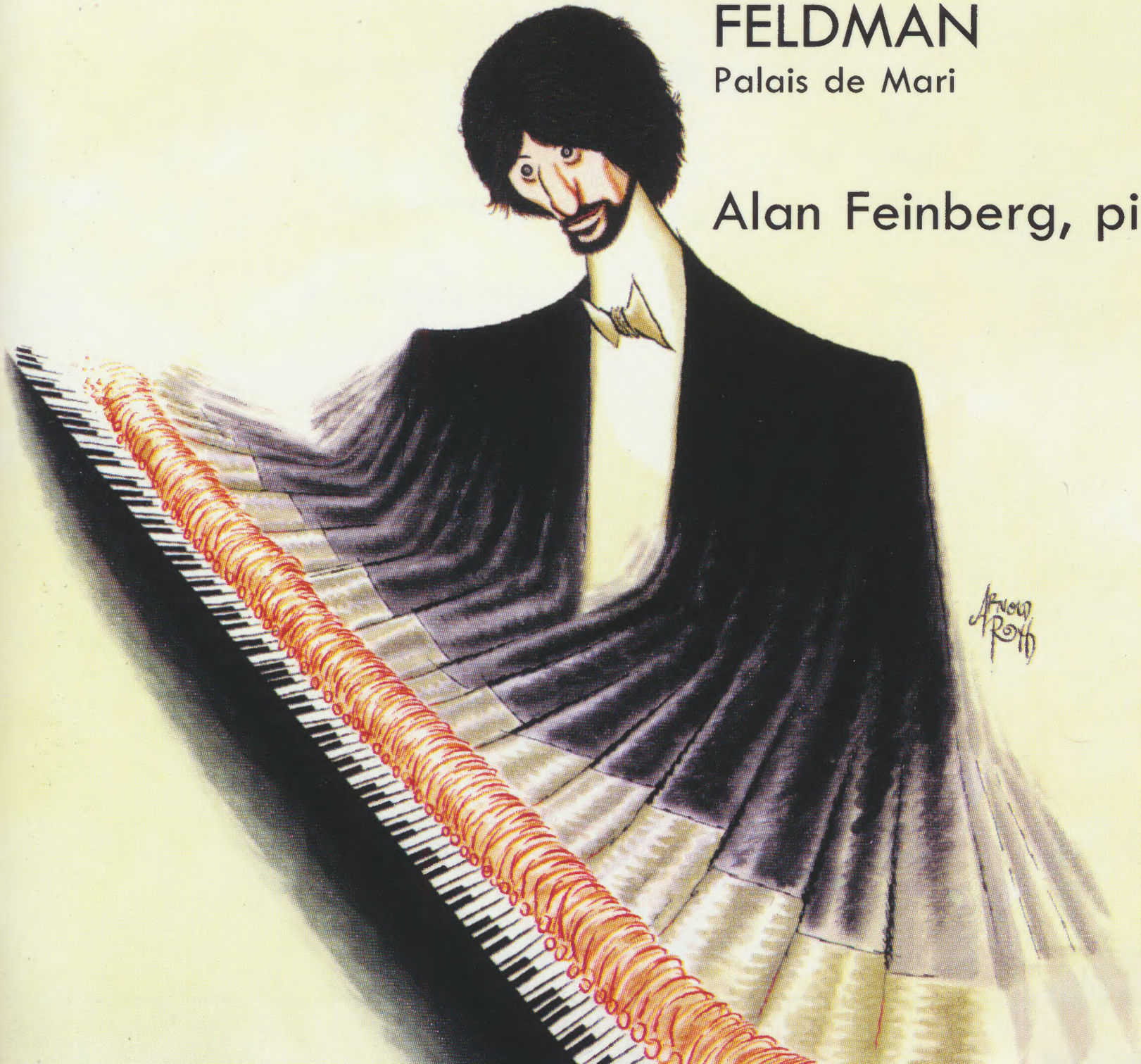
WUORINEN

Third Piano Sonata
Bagatelle
Capriccio

FELDMAN

Palais de Mari

Alan Feinberg, piano



The Group for Contemporary Music
Recording Series

Alan Feinberg, piano

	Charles Wuorinen	
1-3	Third Piano Sonata (1986)	21:45
	Charles Wuorinen	
4	Bagatelle (1987)	8:50
	Morton Feldman	
5	Palais de Mari (1986)	21:44
	Charles Wuorinen	
6	Capriccio (1981)	12:27
	Total time:	65:21

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Charles Wuorinen – Morton Feldman / Alan Feinberg, piano 3-7308-2 H1

3-7308-2

Alan Feinberg, piano

Charles Wuorinen

Third Piano Sonata (1986) [21:45]

1.	♩ = 144	9:08
2.	♪. = 72	7:25
3.	♩ = 120, robust	5:06
4.	*Bagatelle* (1987/88)	8:50

Morton Feldman

5.	*Palais de Mari* (1986)	21:44

Charles Wuorinen

6.	*Capriccio* (1981)	12:27

Total Time 1:05:21

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The extraordinary performances on this disc bear witness to the remarkable virtuosity of Alan Feinberg. But it is easy, in the course of marveling at the prodigious technique that he brings to these interpretations, to overlook the deeper and more important aspect of his art: understanding. I could not ask for a more knowing interpreter of my work, and I want to register my gratitude and admiration here. Equally, I feel sure, would Morton Feldman value the performance of his music on this disc. I knew Feldman in his later years, and can easily imagine his relish at the beautifully sensitive sound-worlds his work engenders under the care of this artist.

Mr. Feinberg gave the first performances of the Capriccio and the Sonata; the latter was, in fact, a commission for him. It gives me great pleasure that he has now made the first recordings of these works.

—C.W.

Appearances can be so simple. In the middle of the twentieth century, the world of 'serious' music was neatly divided into two mutually hostile camps. On the one side was the 'avant-garde', who followed up the ideas of the great early pioneers of the century, in particular Arnold Schoenberg and his 'method of composing with twelve tones'. On the other side were the traditionalists: either upholding 'eternal values' against an over-precious and over-cerebral contemporary music establishment, or acting as a tiresome and irrelevant drag on the advance of musical thought – depending on your point of view. And then in the 1970s and 80s the bright and cheery minimalists cleaned up (in more sense than one!) the whole joint with their music easy to listen to and even easier to compose.

Astonishingly, there are many critics and commentators who continue to interpret the musical world in such simplistic terms, forgetting those exceptions such as Stravinsky and Copland who 'changed sides', or Messiaen whose breadth of vision encompassed traditional and avant-garde alike. When the time eventually comes for a truly painstaking and dispassionate sizing-up of this extraordinary, complex, contradictory and turbulent century in music, hopefully the 'exceptions' will at last overshadow those perceived 'rules', composers whose extreme individuality defied convenient categorization altogether will at last be put properly on the musical map.

One of these composers is Stefan Wolpe, who was an important influence on the early development of both composers represented on this disc, Charles Wuorinen and Morton Feldman. Wolpe remains little known, especially in Europe, although he was a native of Berlin. His reputation, as a composer but even more as a teacher, is stronger in the United States where – initially as a refugee from Hitler – he was based for the last 30 years of his life.

Wolpe was a 'Schoenbergian' in the sense that, after beginning to explore the twelve-tone method in the 1930s, he continued to work within its overall philosophy for the rest of his life (in a completely original way, however). The avant-garde leaders of the late 1940s, especially Boulez and Stockhausen, were developing twelve tone serialism by concentrating on the more complex, hard-edged and modular aspects of the idea – indeed following Webern rather than Schoenberg himself. But Wolpe was seeking to give their twelve-tone language a radically different face: organic, fluid, mercurial.

The mercurial aspect of Wolpe's music left its imprint on Wuorinen's music from an early stage. But at the outset of his career in the late 1950s Wuorinen was also close to Milton Babbitt, who at the time was developing 'total serialism' as an extreme extension of Schoenberg's ideas. From this Wolpe-Babbitt fusion, Wuorinen quickly evolved a highly personal style: with a strong rhythmic drive, harmonic pungency and sense of musical sure-footedness.

In comparison to many of the serialists of the 1950s and 60s, Wuorinen's scores have always had an uncluttered, rational look. And despite some mild flirtation with a few of the avant-garde preoccupations of the 60s, such as electronics, it's clear that Wuorinen from an early stage hankered after a

European-style 'common practice' as strongly as any traditionalist. Wuorinen's post-Schoenbergian methods might well be a more historically realistic way of achieving that ideal than the romantic tonalism of many overt traditionalists.

Indeed Wuorinen is altogether a realist. He has a distinguished performing record as pianist and conductor, and is prominent in organizational, political and economic matters of new music in America. So it's no surprise that Wuorinen is also vastly prolific: some 200 works in a 40-year career (to date) in every genre, including opera and ballet – and with particular relevance to this CD, three piano concertos and three piano sonatas.

Throughout the 1960s Wuorinen's music had an unrelenting aspect, particularly in the harmony. A degree of softening appeared during the 1970s, after Wuorinen had become interested in Stravinsky. This was not the exotic Stravinsky of the early ballets, or the surreal Stravinsky of the 'neoclassical' period, but the Stravinsky who in old age had embraced the twelve-tone practice pioneered by Schoenberg.

Wuorinen's 'softening' did not involve any lessening of organizational rigour. But triads and other aspects of tonal bias began to appear. Serialists had tended to shun these 'dangerous symptoms' of classic tonality. However Stravinsky's example showed that they could be incorporated into twelve-tone language with great effect.

For Wuorinen, an important turning-point came in 1974, when Stravinsky's widow entrusted to him some sketches for an orchestral work which the aged master had left incomplete at his death in 1971. As a result Wuorinen composed the beautiful and statuesque *Reliquary for Igor Stravinsky*, in which the Stravinsky material appeared enfolded in the music Wuorinen had composed from the same sketches.

But an even more radical, more subtle transformation for Wuorinen was on the way: initially not influenced by other music at all, but by the revolution in the wider world of ideas. The Polish-French-American mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot pioneered his theories of chaos and 'fractal' geometry in the 1960s: ideas which gradually became influential, indeed fashionable, in the ensuing decades. Mandelbrot's thinking embraces such diverse fields as economics, behaviour studies, weather, the natural sciences – anywhere that nature, including human nature, rules. Which is everywhere: since fractal and chaos theories describe rhythm, flow, interferences, fractures and transformations which unify all natural processes.

It is, in its comprehensiveness, a radical way of reconsidering the world; and is a total contrast to the great modernist and reductionist ideas of the early 20th century: precisely because it is so anti-reductive, and admits the irregularities, proportionalities, hierarchies and sheer messiness of 'real life'.

This revolution in ideas has been clearly reflected in musical developments. On one hand, the twelve-tone concept of Schoenberg is a perfect example of early 20th-century reductionism. On the other hand, the implications of 'fractals' for composers are obvious: figures as diverse as Ligeti, Nørgård and Xenakis have, in their different ways, taken them up. But for Wuorinen, it isn't his way to overthrow one philosophy with another. He has achieved an extraordinary reconciliation between what ought to be irreconcilable opposites, 'fractal' and twelve-tone language. Thus, in a systematic and greatly extended fashion, Wuorinen has achieved aims which Wolpe was feeling his way towards, decades before the word 'fractal' was invented.

Those aspects of Wuorinen's which are most familiar from early years remain in the mercurial, angular and agile surfaces of the music. The revolution is beneath, in the sense of large-scale organization, which now has that feeling of ebb and flow. One can compare the combination to a lava flow after a volcanic eruption: crusty on top, molten within.

Wuorinen's *Third Piano Sonata* (1986) displays a huge range of emotion and texture, not only between each of the three movements, but within the movements themselves – especially the first two. Wuorinen (as so often) insists that 'there is no message conveyed, nor 'point' being made other than in the expressive relationships of the notes themselves'. Nevertheless those relationships are not only acutely vivid, but also represent a rather unusual re-distribution of the normally-understood oppositions of dissonant-against-triadic, violent-against-gentle. To a considerable degree Wuorinen's harmony sounds most dissonant in the gentlest moments, for example in the central slow movement. In contrast some of the most violent passages are triadic: including the strident opening of the work, and the stabbing chords in the middle-to-low register which, in all three movements, announce the close.

Otherwise, listeners already familiar with Wuorinen's music from the 1980's will recognize the sudden changes, the soaring leaps and the occasional manic doodling around a static point before the music again swoops off in a new direction. For a pianist, all this adds up to a terrifying challenge, most of all in the brief, toccata-like finale.

Now and then Wuorinen has produced occasional pieces with a significantly different character to his larger, more formal works. The *Bagatelle* (1987-88) is statuesque and contemplative, with a rather orchestral texture compared to the highly virtuosic *Third Sonata*. Indeed Wuorinen has orchestrated the *Bagatelle*, entitled *Astra.*

The *Capriccio* (1980-81) is in a single movement, considerably longer than the *Bagatelle*, or indeed any single movement in the *Sonata.* In character it lies somewhat between the worlds of both of those works: beginning spare and reflective, but gradually becoming more active, strident and virtuosic. This process is hastened along by the nervously oscillating figures which invade the texture from time to time – taking off in two surreally fluttering cadenza like passages toward the end. But in general the character of this singular capriccio, as so often in Wuorinen's music, is most distinctive in the harmony.

The ear is not so much taken up with issues of dissonance and consonance, as in the Sonata, but by the clear, neither dissonant nor consonant acidity of the perfect fifth and perfect fourth which clang, bell-like throughout the work.

Morton Feldman, was a student of Wolpe (when Wolpe was a relatively recent immigrant to the United States) – in Feldman's case this was but one step in a journey, not only away from Schoenbergianism altogether, but right to the far edges of the musical world. The next step was an important association with John Cage. And then came fruitful relationships altogether outside musical circles, for example with painters Mark Rothko, Franz Klein and Jackson Pollock.

In the drawing-up of his scores, Feldman progressively abandoned many of the recognized specifics of composition, including at various times specific pitch and duration. Eventually in the 1970s Feldman returned to the world of fully notated music, though not before he had evolved an inimitable personal style, intense, quiet, searching, and avoiding distracting gesture or rhetoric.

Some of the more 'standard' minimalists have attempted to claim Feldman as one of their number: but there is nothing machine-made in Feldman's music. No one has been able to find any system operating in his work; and its patterns and repetitions are more like the oriental rugs of which Feldman was an obsessive collector.

From the late 1970s onwards Feldman's works became longer and longer (up to five and half hours for the *Second String Quartet*). When Bunita Marcus commissioned *Palais de Mari* (1986) she asked Feldman to distill the essence of those long pieces into a short one – requesting a ten-minute piece because she knew she would get one twice as long. Feldman said the title (meaning 'wedding palace') came from a photograph he saw in the Louvre museum, of an ancient ruin somewhere in the far east. *Palais de Mari* was one of the last works Feldman composed before his tragically premature death in 1987.

Some of the great pioneers of the early twentieth century, who took it for granted that they would never hear an adequate performance of their music, would be astonished at performing conditions today. Many composers in America, Europe and the Far East can now confidently look forward to professional performance, swiftly and accurately rehearsed, of often complex new works. This is another of the great stories in music of the last half century.

Even in this enhanced context there are still individuals who stand out and point to fresh directions for the performance of new music. These are especially remarkable if they are pianists, like Alan Feinberg, or – for example – members of a string quartet: because of the very choice of their instrument or ensemble they automatically a huge resonance of classical tradition which can intimidate some composers. Significantly, praise has gone to Alan Feinberg not only for his exceptional virtuosity, but also for his adventurous and highly individual concert programming. It is impossible to overestimate the importance – to a composer – of a performer who can thus reinterpret and refresh a continuing tradition.

Feinberg's association with Wuorinen began at a poignant time. Wuorinen had dedicated his *Capriccio* to Robert Miller about whom he says: 'his passing in 1981 was a great and premature loss to music, and for me the loss of a dear friend'. Miller was never to play the *Capriccio*, but, says Wuorinen, 'it could not have found a better initial exponent than Alan Feinberg' who first performed the work in 1982. Encouraged by such a display of Feinberg's gifts Wuorinen made him the dedicatee of his Third Piano Sonata: 'the virtuosity required to play the piece,' Wuorinen says, 'is perhaps the clearest manifestation of my extremely high regard for Alan Feinberg's playing'.

Listeners should not imagine that the extreme contrast of Feldman's *Palais de Mari* represents any lesser degree of virtuosity. Feinberg's concentration, control and intensity is the absolute sine qua non of this extraordinary recording.

Peter Paul Nash is an English composer.

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Steinway piano
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